

6 June 2010: Proper 5C
1 Kings 17:8-24; Ps 146
Gal 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

Rev. Deborah Meister

Last week, my god-son Isaac came home from summer camp and asked his mother, "Is it true that only Christians believe in God and everyone else is going to Hell?" (Perhaps I should have mentioned: It's a Southern Baptist summer camp.) His mother, who is, I think, a brilliant parent, took a deep breath and began to reply, "Well, it's true that many, many people believe that, but your father and I do not." Then she explained what they do believe and why they believe it. It was, perhaps, Isaac's first encounter with the troubling fact that Christians from different denominations believe different things.

When we speak of the challenges of living in a pluralistic world, we speak, most often, of the issues which arise when we live among people of other faiths: our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or non-believing neighbors who are manifestly good people. But there is another challenge which faces us: living among Christians whose interpretation of the faith is different from our own. When we hear a televangelist preaching against the equality of women, or are confronted on campus by a person who asks us about the date and time of our conversion, or when we encounter people whose understanding of the creation story differs from our own (whatever that may be), part of our difficulty in responding lies in the fact that they follow and love the *same* God we do, under the *same* name. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," but what do we do when other Christians seem to espouse different truths than we do?

These issues are not new. They have been with the church as long as there has been a church (and, indeed, they were and are present in every other major religion as well). St. Paul engages them directly in his Letter to the Galatians, which we begin to read today. "I am astonished," writes Paul, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel." (Gal 1:6) *I am astonished!* In that one sentence, he sums up a complex narrative. Paul himself had traveled through Galatia, now part of modern Turkey, and had planted churches among its cities. After he moved on to plant churches in other places, however, a different set of evangelists came through, probably from the Christian community centered in Jerusalem. And they were not teaching the same things about Jesus that Paul had taught. Paul had said that Gentiles who wished to follow Jesus did not need to become Jews first; these other evangelists said that they did. Even worse, those other evangelists -- the interfering busybodies! -- were coming from a community which had known Jesus in the flesh, as Paul had not. And so Paul was having a crisis of authority.

Paul takes the field with all guns blaring. Listen to how he begins his letter, "Paul an apostle - sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Christ Jesus and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead -- and all the members of God's family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Gal 1:1) Now, Paul usually used the first sentence of his letters to set out the major themes he was going to discuss, and here it is all about authority. First, he claims to be an apostle, a title usually reserved for the Twelve. Then he claims that he was sent (that's what "apostle" means, "one who is sent"), not by people, mere human beings, but by God himself, the Lord of life and death. Then he reminds his readers that there are a whole lot of other Christians who agree with him ("all the members of God's family who are with me"). Finally, he blesses them while speaking in the name of God himself.

In other words, he is loaded for bear -- except that the very vehemence of his protest suggests that he may fear he is on shaky ground. Much like people whose opposition to evolution grows with the discovery of each new fossil, Paul may be channeling his own anxiety into theological passion. He continues his defense of his ministry in the passage we read today: "The Gospel that

was proclaimed by me was not of human origin.” (Gal 1:11) I “received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” (Gal 1:12) And on and on he goes, acknowledging his former persecution of the church, claiming former his excellence in Judaism (he was no immoral reprobate!), resolutely refusing to acknowledge any debt to any other human being in what he taught, but claiming that he had his truth from God alone. It is the oldest claim in the book, and the least verifiable. Because, of course, the other evangelists also believed that their teaching was from God. They and Paul were interpreting the *same* Scriptures: the Hebrew Bible, which those who followed Jesus and the Jews who did not both recognized as authoritative. (At this point, the Christian scriptures were still being written, and it would be almost two hundred years before they were canonized.) If both groups were interpreting the same holy writings, how could you tell whose voice was speaking the Word of God?

Today’s other Scriptures suggest that taking it on faith is not the answer -- at least, not taking it on faith as that is usually understood. Too often, people tell us that faith is a matter of believing what we are told and squelching our doubts by accepting the authority of those who teach us. And yet, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is. To take something on faith doesn’t mean accepting it blindly. Rather, the life of faith is one of continually testing the truth: asking our questions, sifting through the evidence of our experience, searching the Scriptures, and then making our best guess, in the absence of certainty, until the next question comes along.

The widow of Zarephath lives this process in the course of her encounter with Elijah. A few verses earlier, Elijah had appeared from nowhere and vaulted into the pages of Scripture by commanding that there be a drought until King Ahab repented of his wickedness. Then he flees, first to a wilderness where he is fed by ravens, then into Zarephath, a foreign land -- the homeland, in fact, of Ahab’s terrible queen, Jezebel. When he meets the widow and asks her for food and drink, she replies, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing.” (I Kings 17:12) *As the Lord your God lives.* It appears that Elijah’s reputation has preceded him; somehow, the widow knows that he is a man of God. Indeed, she may well be terrified of him: a man who could inflict drought upon an entire nation and region is not a safe companion. But she helps him, and he, her, until the day when it all goes terribly wrong. Her son dies, and she turns to him in rage and grief and cries out, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to bring my sin to remembrance!” (I Kings 17: 18) In the face of this sudden loss, the widow rejects her growing understanding of God as the one who has fed and sustained her and reverts to her earlier belief in a punitive God. But Elijah (who appears equally appalled) raises the boy to life again, and, in the face of that miracle, the woman proclaims, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” (I Kings 17:24) *Now I know...* She had taken it on faith for a long time, but now she can claim it from her own experience.

She could not be more different from the Centurion who appears just before Christ encounters the widow in Nain, a man whose faith seems to be deep and pure, even without any evidence at all. A Gentile, a non-believer, he sends some Jewish elders to Christ to beg Christ to heal his servant, who is almost dead. But when Christ agrees to go with him, the Centurion demurs, saying “Do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,” and he comes.” (Luke 7: 6-8) The Centurion has, somehow, such trust in Jesus that he does not even need to see him face-to-face (both conversations are mediated through others); even Jesus marvels and is astonished. And yet, both the Centurion in his faith and the widow with her wrestling and her skepticism receive miracles.

This is good news for us, for not many of us get to witness miracles. Not many of us see our dead come back to life in this world. Not all of us have the faith of the Centurion. But that seems not to matter. What matters is our willingness to engage with God honestly, with all that we are.

When the widow bears the body of her dead boy to Elijah, when the Centurion sends his servants to intercept Jesus, each of them is placing their heart in their hands and seeing what will come. They know -- only too well -- that not everyone gets a miracle. They know -- only too well -- that too many boys die, that too many servants suffer. They know that sometimes the only gift we get when we risk everything is a greater knowledge of what is true for us. But Jesus *is* that truth. Somehow, in the terrifying encounter, we find Jesus Himself.

Or he finds us.

Paul was not seeking God when he traveled the road to Damascus; he thought he knew who God was. He was not expecting God to shatter his world and break apart the life he had made for himself. The widow at Nain was not seeking God when she carried her son's body through the gates of the city, one last time. She and those around her seem to have accepted that he was dead. She did not expect God to appear out of nowhere and turn her world right-side-up. Perhaps, somewhere in there, lies the truth: That God is not someone we can control or predict, is not someone we can always understand. That we can seek God for years without being aware that we have been found by him, without knowing any greater miracle than the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit impelling us to keep on asking, keep on asking, keep on asking. That any real encounter with God will shatter our certainties, exceed our doctrines, and up-end our world. We can choose to cling to our own understandings closely, and we will always be wrong. Or, we can encounter other Christians with open hearts and with hope and seek to learn from them, as we seek to learn from people who do not share our faith at all.

I have a theory about what happens at the final judgment, a theory which has been approved by no theologians at all. I believe that when we die, each one of us will stand before the throne of God and look upon God's face. And at that time, some people will see that God is not who they thought God would be, and they will turn away and refuse to look at God again, because God does not fit into their box. And others of us will look and see that God is not who we thought God would be, and will fall on our knees in awe, and will say, "I was so wrong. I loved you, and I sought you, and I did my best, but you are so much more magnificent than anything I could imagine." And at that point, we will find ourselves in that heavenly city where God dwells, surrounded by all our brothers and sisters in faith with whom we disagreed, because they were as wrong as we were, and we will find that, in the light of God's presence and in gift of God's grace, it will not matter anymore at all.